

Sketch

Volume 1, Number 1

1934

Article 14

Ranger

Don McGuiness*

*Iowa State University

Copyright ©1934 by the authors. *Sketch* is produced by The Berkeley Electronic Press (bepress).
<http://lib.dr.iastate.edu/sketch>

RANGER

By Donald McGuiness

JOE KATZ stepped confidently out upon the wind-swept porch of the only store of the little mountain village. Knocking the burning tobacco from his reeking pipe he glanced up at Old Mattern, her crest now lost to sight in fast darkening skies. Half-way up that mountain's forbidding north slope was a little cabin. Billy Carr was lying there with a badly infected leg.

Katz's bushy brow contracted in a worried frown as he thought of Billy, so young and unafraid, bearing inconceivable pain without a whimper. Billy was young, just four months out of school. He had been green when he had arrived on that long ago day in June to become Joe's understudy on the Old Mattern Forest Reserve. But he had showed a pluck and a willingness to learn that had touched even the rough, unsympathetic soul of Joe Katz. Once he had told Joe about a girl in New York who was waiting for him to make good. The calloused old ranger then had shown an interest in women for the first time in the fifty-odd years of his life. Billy had been learning the tricks rapidly until he had fallen and torn his leg two days before on one of Old Mattern's jagged whiskers.

Katz realized that he must hurry to get the precious serum to the suffering boy in time. He buckled his warm ranger's coat about his bulky frame and clambered slowly onto the mountain pony waiting for him. It was a three-mile ride to the half-deserted little tourist inn at the end of the trail and after that a two-mile walk up the steep, stony path to the little cabin that served as a lookout station.

KATZ WAS seldom in a hurry, but when he did want to move rapidly, he tolerated no retarding interferences. It seemed that on this stormy afternoon the pony was slow, and the burly man vented his rage by cursing—profusely, steadily, almost inaudibly. The wind was growing colder, and the driving snow-

flakes stung his ruddy, bewhiskered face like angry bees.

Old Mattern boomed a challenge to him that reverberated through the tossing pines like the roar of a waterfall, and they answered, moaning wierdly.

It was four o'clock when he reached the inn. He could scarcely discern its brown walls, steeped high with manure.

The caretaker, a bearded old mountaineer, came out to stable the pony. Katz walked beside him as he led the tired animal to the barn.

"**P**RETTY BAD night out." His dry cackle could hardly be heard above the roar of the storm. "Better stay with me till mornin'. I'll have the woman getcha somethin' ta eat."

"Nope," Katz's voice boomed back. "Gotta get up ta the kid. He's sick up there. Needs me. Good boy, Jake. Hate ta see anything happen to him."

Joe turned away abruptly and headed for the narrow trail that led behind the stable and up the mountain. He had said more than was his wont. But he was worried. It was not the dangerous two-mile trek over the narrow trail that led up the slopes of Old Mattern which bothered him. That boy was sick, perhaps dying.

He walked rapidly now, a vision of the boy always before him. The snow was getting deeper. Mattern seemed determined to shake this human impostor from its scarred side. He moved rapidly along a ledge of rock, scarcely a yard wide, expecting the wind to whisk him to certain death on the rocks below at any moment.

It was cold on this unprotected ledge. His hands were numb; he had been riding all afternoon. The long black whiskers of his two-weeks growth of beard were transformed into white icicles. He rounded a sharp turn in the trail and paused to get his breath in a sheltered corner. His cold hands felt for the precious package. It was still there. Buckling his coat again he moved slowly on, up a narrow crevice. He stumbled and fell into three feet of snow. Rising he shook his fists at the howling elements, cursing fluently. Old Mattern increased its roaring. Katz groped ahead, unsteadily, falling, rising, falling again—and each time he fell he was slower to rise.

The snow seemed to reach up and pull him down; but always he managed to regain his feet—the vision of that boy, so young

and enthusiastic, remained before him.

Once when he fell he did not rise. The wind lashed the snow over his still form. As night settled swiftly over Old Mattern the black figure disappeared from sight beneath a white blanket of ice and snow.

IT WAS the next June before the villagers could get through the huge snow drifts to the little cabin. On the straw-filled bunk was the figure of the boy, frozen. Death and winter had preserved him as he was in life. He was smiling, as he had always smiled since he had come to the mountains just a year before.

Katz could not be found. The feathery legions of the snow-gods had claimed him for their own.

With bowed heads the little party stood. The sun was shining outside the cabin, but Old Mattern still remained impassive—its frowning profile dark, treacherous, formidable.



Kay:---

By Johanna Fiene

I FEEL like crying :
 You were here
 While I was gone.
 I feel like singing :
 I have you here
 In the violets you left for me—
 Demure,
 Sweet,
 Precious.
 When I bury my face
 In their purple sweetness
 I feel those quick,
 Impulsive caresses
 You used to give me.